

Syrian Cities and Relations with Saddam Hussein

24 September 1991

Israel Shahak

Numerous translations of mine from the Hebrew press envision, from time to time, a 'pre-emptive' Israeli war as likely and as directed against Syria, which has been long regarded by Israel as its enemy number one. Particularly relevant in this context is the 18 February 1991 speech by Yitzhak Rabin (as the head of opposition) to the Labor Knesset faction. Rabin's speech contained three crucial points. The first point was that Israel was doomed to live forever in war, or under the threat of war with the entire Arab world, but at this point of time especially with Syria. The second was that in all its wars Israel 'must assume an essentially aggressive role, so as to be in the position to dictate the terms of a conclusion'. Prerequisite to that is 'a further increase of the offensive power of Israeli Air and Armour forces needed to achieve a quick victory'. The third was Rabin's criticism of Arens (then the Defence Minister) for letting Iraqi missiles hit Israel: 'What had we told them (the Arabs)? If you send missiles on Tel Aviv, Damascus will be turned into a ruin. If you send missiles also on Haifa, not only Damascus but also Aleppo will cease to exist. They will be destroyed root and branch. Without dealing only with missile launchers, we will devastate Damascus.' Various Israeli commentators, e.g. Uzi Benziman and Reuven Padatzur of Haaretz and Ya'akov Sharett of Davar, understood these words as intended to mean that Israel had already threatened Syria (and other Arab countries as well) with obliteration of its cities by nuclear weapons.

Here I will describe what probably was the first instance when the highest Israeli authorities actually contemplated the razing of four Syrian cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia. The story which occurred during the October 1973 War is documented by Yigal Sama (Yediot Ahronot, 17 September 1991). Sama's facts are based on extensive documentation supplied by Aryeh Brown, the then military secretary of the Defence Minister, Moshe Dayan. Sama's article contains an interview with Brown who defines himself as 'loyal to Dayan, and trusting his judgement fully, both

(47)

during that war and on other occasions'. Significantly, Brown also says that he owed his quick rise in rank to Dayan.

Sama's article appeared on the Eve of Yom Kippur when analyses of the 1973 Yom Kippur War are customarily published by the Hebrew press. I find it significant that no other Israeli war, such as the War of Independence and the Six Day War, duly commemorated as they are, receive even a fraction of printed space which the history of the 1973 War continues to receive. Sama himself fought in that war as a tank commander on the Syrian front. As for Sama's personal attitude, he says that together with 'a whole generation of Israelis, then traumatized to the core', he has since that war

`acquired a split personality with half of it remaining in the past and the second half facing the future'. This can mean that the attitudes of the entire generation then changed. As Sarna says, that generation `now passes on the emotions then learned to their sons'. All Israeli politics from 1973 can best be understood as a reaction to the Yom Kippur War. That reaction, however, may assume antithetical directions.

The personality of Moshe Dayan needs to be taken into account here. I have always been very critical of Dayan, but I think that whatever can be said of his politics, there can be little doubt that, while the Israeli grand strategy precedes his time, he was also a master tactician, who invented the Israeli Army's doctrine of deterrence, along with other tactical innovations which still largely determine the Israeli Army's strategies and tactics, but above everything else in its attitudes towards the Arabs. Just before October 1973 Dayan was at the peak of his popularity, not only in Israel but also among the diaspora Jews. His popularity rested in my view mainly on his radiant confidence that Israel could retain the Territories conquered in that war indefinitely. He argued that the Arab states either would not dare attack Israel, or, if they did, their resounding defeat after a short war was assured.

Already on the second day of the Yom Kippur War (7 October), however, Dayan together with all other Israeli leaders realized that the war was going badly, w7th all their hopes for a rapid victory dashed. As Brown recounts, they nevertheless kept pretending to the Israelis as well as to the whole world (including their friend Henry Kissinger) that everything was going on according to the Israeli Army's plans. (A major carrier of this deception was Hayim Herzog, then the chief TV commentator and now President of the state.) The deception only aggravated the situation.

As Brown recounts it, on 7 October, at 11:45 a.m., 'Moshe Dayan and his chief military adviser General Rehavam Ze'evi (now the leader of the transfer-advocating Moledet ('Fatherland') party) already recognized the full dimensions of the [Israeli] defeat.' They came to this recognition in spite of being misinformed by some

(48)

generals, especially the commander of the Southern Command responsible for the Suez front, Gonen (alias Gorodish) who `kept reporting favourable developments only'. Shortly afterwards Dayan reported his conclusions to several Israeli ministers and then to Prime Minister Golda Meir. The next day (8 October), counterattacks by fresh Israeli forces, were, according to Brown, `predicated on the Air Force's false reports of smashing successes'. No wonder the counter-attacks ended up in another defeat, more decisive than the defeats of the previous day. Although at the session of the Israeli government held on the evening of that day Dayan did not reveal the extent of the defeat, he was well aware of it. On a piece of paper guarded by Brown he sketched guidelines to be followed during the next several days. After summarizing the adversities on the Egyptian front he wrote there: 'Everything possible should be done to terminate fighting on the Northern [Syrian] front at once, so that we have only one [the Egyptian] front to cope with.' He decided to discuss this with the Chief of Staff, David Elazar. Next morning he met senior officers to whom he presented another argument for terminating the war against Syria `at once': 'I expect traumatic reactions when the Israelis discover the truth.' As subsequent developments showed, in this respect Dayan

was a good prophet. Possibly, the crucial consideration underlying his subsequent decisions was to prevent Israelis from learning the truth.

'At the meeting (with senior officers)', continues Sarna, 'instructions were drafted which even Brown considered devoid of all precedent.' In addition to orders to Israeli troops fighting the Syrians on the ground to destroy the Syrian Army without regard for their own casualties, they also included 'the orders to find out by any means, including the most bizarre ones, what could be done' in order to defeat the Syrians rapidly. Brown explains to Sama that 'it was Dayan who first advanced the idea that Syria must be crushed to pieces. When he talked about "the bizarre means", he meant to stress that anything was conceivable ... In the diaries of Brown from that time, the word "Damascus" from that moment onward begins to appear very frequently. Dayan, the Chief of Staff, the commander of the Air Force, all talked about Damascus. "We must smash Syria within the next 24 hours", said the Chief of Staff to the accompanying officers. "We have 400 tanks now fighting like hell. Therefore the Syrian cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia should be obliterated. I must do something dramatic enough to make Syria cry 'Whoah!', to make them beg us 'Please stop firing!' For that purpose I need something that will deprive them of all electricity, destroy all their power stations, and scorch their earth'".

But in order to use such 'bizarre means', Israeli generals needed an authorization by civilian authorities. The next day Dayan,

(49)

accompanied by Yigal Alon [a renowned Palmach commander in 1948 and former Foreign Minister] 'who backed him', held an early morning meeting with Golda Meir. Sarna does not know what transpired there, except for the outcome. No permission to use 'bizarre means' was granted. Instead, 'the Air Force was instructed by the Chief of Staff "to smash Syria" by conventional means. The government which met later that day was informed that during the air raid on Damascus taking place simultaneously, 'all targets had already been hit'. Only after the ministers dispersed, a report arrived 'that only some targets had been hit, among them the Soviet cultural center'. Damascus was not obliterated by conventional means. The Air Force attributed its failure 'to heavy cloud'.

At this point Sama's narrative breaks for about seven to eight days. This may be due either to Brown's reluctance to talk or to a censorship ban. Judging by references to events on the Syrian front, the narrative resumes from 15-16 October. By then, Israeli commanders, instead of working alone as they did at the beginning of the war, were working in close coordination with Henry Kissinger. The planning aimed no longer at obliterating Damascus (other Syrian cities were no longer even mentioned), but at besieging or conquering it. Only some of the generals demanded sterner measures. The idea animating everybody was to conclude the war by a great victory in the style of the Six Day War, but on a larger scale.

One October night Dayan wrote an instruction: 'I plan complete destruction of the Syrian army. If Damascus can be conquered, its conquest should be considered ... Our entry into Damascus could balance our retreat from the [Suez] Canal.' Next morning 'the Chief of Staff asked for a missile of 40-km range to be launched on to Damascus.

Dayan rejected that request.' We can make the conjecture that the missile which the Chief of Staff requested was not meant to have a conventional warhead. Then Dayan went to the command of General Rafael Eitan on the Syrian front to tell him: 'Our aim is to reach Damascus. The conduct of the war depends on our ability to reach Damascus ... We should proceed toward it, attacking on a narrow front, and [then] make an assault on the city, so that they will be forced to beg us to refrain from conquering it.' Eitan is recorded by Brown as promising Dayan that Damascus would soon be conquered and as issuing the requisite orders at once, while Dayan watched to see what would follow: 'After two hours the spearhead of the advancing Armour brigade commanded by General Lerner, reported having been hit by a Syrian anti-tank force. The Syrians awaited the Israelis in ambush and inflicted heavy casualties. Yet Dayan continued to think about the conquest of Damascus.' After several hours, when Lerner's brigade

(50)

retreated and began reassembling, 'Dayan radioed Lerner: "I want to tell you that if you reach the gates of Damascus with speed you will vindicate our loss of the [Suez] Canal." At the same time, however, he received a report from the Chief of Staff: "I cannot reach Damascus." Dayan answered: "I now want to reach the vicinity of Damascus, rather than the city itself. It will suffice if they say to the Russians: "Help us to get rid of the Jews"'.

Yet the same day Dayan promised Golda Meir to either conquer Damascus or at least reach its outskirts, and he repeated this at a government meeting. Then he went to the generals commanding the Syrian front, telling them: 'Our troops need to advance no more than 5 or 7 km. From there we can reach Damascus which lies at the distance of only 25 km. further. This can be accomplished easily enough.' What he apparently expected was that after an initial offensive the Syrian Army would break apart and run away, in the same way as the Egyptian Army had done in 1967. In fact, his (and his generals') reasoning relied entirely on folk psychology: on their own preconceptions about 'Arab mentality'. There was a 'strategy based on the presumed psychology of the Arabs'. This strategy prevailed at the same meeting, when the commander of the Air Force, Benny Peled, proposed that Damascus be bombed from the air rather than conquered. Dayan responded: 'The Syrians know that aircraft sows destruction but cannot conquer. But if we shell them with artillery, they will feel that we are about to conquer the city soon.'

But another factor also played its role. Brown records that 'the State Secretary [Kissinger] instantly receives the reports of all the movements of the Israeli troops. He is deliberately staying the political process in order to enable Israel to negotiate later from a more advantageous position. Kissinger is certain that Damascus will be conquered, to the point of having quipped to Dinitz [Israeli Ambassador in the US]: "As soon as you reach the suburbs of Damascus, all you will need for the rest is the public transport"'. He said it 'ten days before the end of the war'. It was due to his interaction with Kissinger that Dayan insisted on 'the conquest of Damascus within a few days'.

The role of Begin, then head of the Israeli opposition, was downright comical. Prompted by 'the phone calls I keep getting from Sharon at the [Egyptian] front', Begin told Dayan that the conquest of Damascus was imperative 'for the sake of liberating the Syrian Jews'. (He apparently meant those who would survive the bombing of

Damascus.) Dayan dismissed him courteously. Dayan was still so sure that Damascus could at the very least be besieged by the Israeli forces that 'he began to worry about what might happen to those forces in the vicinity of Damascus during the entire rainy season', i.e. the winter.

(51)

Sarna, who served all that time at the front, records that the aim of conquering Damascus was passed on to the troops. 'In fact, the [Israeli] forces in the Golan Heights were already exhausted and unable to break through the [Syrian] defence lines separating them from Damascus. Still, the goal of conquering Damascus raised the morale of the troops, their faith in the continuous attack and their ability to be always able to advance toward designated targets'. Yet he reflects: 'I now think that distances on the Chief of Staff's maps must have seemed short compared to the slowness of our advances and to the scale of our casualties in human lives and also in armour which we suffered for each of 100 meters we have traversed ... As a tankist advancing on "a narrow front" towards Damascus, I recall how distant we were from the city, how dispirited while watching their defence lines, how worn out by their continuous mortar shelling of our night encampments. The attempt to conquer Damascus was unreal but at the same time it was essential because it restored our morale after our war-machine broke down'. This is indeed a telling testimony of ignorance of the Israeli warlords about the conditions their own soldiers were fighting under. To all appearances, that ignorance has deepened since.

Sarna's story is ominous because the fundamental aims of the Israeli army top commanders can be presumed to remain the same and the folk psychology guiding their decisions can be presumed not to have changed either. The ideas of fighting Syria with nuclear weapons are unlikely to have been discarded. The recourse to nuclear weapons on Israel's part, whether for the sake of obliterating the four mentioned Syrian cities or of Damascus alone seems to have been prevented in 1973 by the opposition of Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger, both of whom preferred Israel to conquer Damascus by conventional means.

Past contacts between Israel and Saddam Hussein 10 November 1990

In the middle of the present Gulf crisis it is worth recalling that until a few months ago Saddam Hussein persistently offered to make peace with Israel on the latter's terms. One of his attempts took place about a year ago. The then Defence Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was during one of his visits to the US then approached with an offer that he meet Saddam Hussein. Information to this effect appeared in two articles by the senior strategy and military correspondent of Haaretz, Ze'ev Shiff, who in matters of historical fact can be considered quite reliable (Haaretz, 5 and 6 November 1990). Interestingly, Rabin refused to either confirm or deny the

(52)

revelations, after Haaretz accorded them publicity by printing them on its front page.

The middleman chosen by Saddam Hussein was 'an American businessman of Arab descent ... Bob Abud. At present he is the president of the First City Bank of Texas. In the past he presided over the oil company owned by the multi-millionaire Armand Hammer ... He is 62, well-known for his good relations with some heads of Arab states, for whom he arranges personal loans on easy terms. He also maintains good relations with the Arab-American community. After twelve years of heading Hammer's oil company 'Occidental Petroleum', he became president of a Chicago bank', where 'he developed an interest in advancing the cause of peace between Israel and the Arab states' (Shiff, 6 November). It is not irrelevant to note that Armand Hammer, who is Jewish, has for many years been a fervent Israel supporter, a generous contributor to United Jewish Appeal (of the US) and a major investor in Israel, in addition to being used by Israeli diplomacy as a middleman in political ventures, for example arranging the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel through his contacts with top Soviet leaders.

As Shiff reports it (5 November) the offer was made by Saddam Hussein, who proposed through Abud 'to meet with Yitzhak Rabin, then [Israeli] Defence minister. The dates of two meetings, to be held in Europe were already fixed, although the Iraqis requested to reschedule them. A secret meeting between Rabin and the middleman was held in Philadelphia.' According to Shiff, Abud, 'was held by the Israelis in respect, as somebody with useful connections. Considering this, Rabin expressed his desire to meet him in order to hear directly about the Iraqi proposal.' Prior to meeting Rabin, Mr Abud met several times 'an Israeli businessman living most of his time abroad, Azriel Einav', known for having good connections within the Israeli Defence Ministry and other components of the Israeli Security System. When those meetings proved successful and the consent of Rabin to establish contacts with Saddam Hussein was obtained, an influential aide and personal friend of Rabin, Eytan Haber 'was appointed as a go-between in charge of arranging the meetings' of Rabin with Saddam Hussein. When confronted by Shiff with the evidence, Haber responded that "'something like that" had indeed occurred', but refused to provide any further information.

The Philadelphia meeting of Abud with Rabin was held when the latter attended the opening of an Israeli Bonds convention in that city. Haber and the military secretary of Rabin, Kutli Mor were present during a part of the meeting with Abud. To prevent the press from noticing the meetings, Mr Abud 'entered the hotel through the kitchen door and proceeded to Rabin's suite by a service elevator'. On the agenda was, first, 'the proposal [of Saddam

(53)

Hussein] to meet in order to talk about reconciling the interests of the two states', and, the second, means of averting an Israeli attack on Iraq which was rumoured to be under preparation: 'Rabin accepted the proposal to meet Saddam Hussein at a location to be determined, but rejected the proposal to include a PLO representative during part of these talks.' After this agreement, Mr Abud suggested in the name of Saddam Hussein, that 'Rabin may be invited to a meeting in Baghdad', instead of a meeting in Europe. There is no information about how Rabin responded to this interesting suggestion, except that he 'opined that all leads toward peace with all the Arab states deserve to be examined'.

Contacts between Israel and Iraq and the timing of various meetings were negotiated and renegotiated by Israel and Iraq through the above mentioned go-between during several subsequent months, 'but when the tension between [Israel] and Iraq began to mount after Saddam Hussein's speech at the last February's conference of the Council for Economic Cooperation between Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Yemen, the idea of meeting was shelved', apparently by Israel. Shiff (5 November) writes in conclusion: 'Supposedly, the American businessman was reporting all the details of the negotiations to the White House.'

<http://www.radioislam.org/historia/shahak/opensec/03.htm>